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LETTER FROM SAIGON

NOVEMBER 3

SAIGON today is a city at war not only with the Vietcong but with itself. I have been here a number of times in the last four years, most recently last spring, and each time there has been a difference in tone and atmosphere, mainly in the form of an increase in tension and toughness that has accompanied the increase in the tempo of the war. In no other period, however, has there been such a startling transformation as the one that has taken place in the last six months. When I left Saigon, in April, the American buildup was just beginning. The city, already raw and frenzied, awaited the heavy influx of American forces with confidence and with scarcely concealed greed. Now, with a hundred and fifty thousand American troops in Vietnam and fifty thousand more due to come, it is a thoroughgoing boom town. But, unlike the rest-and-recreation towns I remember from the Second World War—Sydney, to name one—which were quite a distance from the fighting, Saigon is surrounded by the war and, in effect, is part of it. Quite often, battles are fought only a few miles away, and across the Saigon River artillery and flares are heard and seen practically every night, while the skies by day are fuller than ever with screaming or sonic-booming jet fighters and bombers, roaring cargo planes, and sputtering helicopters—sky noises that mix cacophonously with the din of traffic. In the morning, at noon, and in the evening, the streets, many of them chopped up and unrepaired, are practically impassable. The smell of exhaust from the hordes of motorbikes, cars, trucks, and buses fills the air, along with the odor of uncollected garbage and of sheer human swarm. Restaurants where it was once possible to eat a leisurely meal and conduct a quiet conversation are now bursting with boisterous soldiers, and after five o'clock the bars are as crowded as New York subway cars in the rush hour. The Vietcong have been sabotaging the overburdened power lines, and in the evening large sections of the city are blacked out. Every day, there are accounts in the newspapers of raids on brothels and of the arrest of Americans and Vietnamese as a result of fights in bars and other public places, and, all in all, Saigon is scarcely restful.

The overblown condition of the capital has a more serious aspect, too, which has to do with the nature of the war—a war that contains a great many subtle and subtly conflicting social, psychological, and economic elements as well as military and political ones. For the Vietcong, it has always been primarily a war of subversion and attrition. In past years, the campaign of subversion was concentrated in the countryside, where the principal objective of the Communists was to win over the peasantry. To a considerable extent, they succeeded in doing this, but now, what with the deterrent force of American air power, which has blunted their military offensive and upset their political balance, the Vietcong have begun to lose ground in the villages; just how much they have lost and whether they will be able to retrieve it are matters of conjecture. Partly because of the pressure to which they have been subjected in the countryside, they are now paying more attention to the subversion of the cities, and especially of Saigon. The situation is ripe for such tactics, because the capital, in addition to its physical wounds, is suffering from a severe inflation. The cost of living here is officially said to have risen forty or fifty per cent this year, and according to some unofficial estimates it has doubled. Thanks to an emergency import program, which has brought in a hundred thousand tons of rice from Thailand and two hundred thousand tons from America, there is no shortage of this basic commodity, but the price of rice remains high, and some economic experts say that it won't go down unless the United States floods Vietnam with rice. The same goes for certain other necessities. Aside from the masses of the poor, those who suffer most from high prices are civil servants and other wage earners with fixed incomes. The recent increase in family allowances for Vietnamese soldiers has not helped matters, and now observers are saying that instead of more money the families should have been given extra rations of food and clothing.

The government, with American help, has made some efforts to curb inflation, but these have so far proved unavailing, and in terms of Vietnamese piastres on the black market the value of the dollar, as well as the price of gold, which is considered the most important financial indicator, gyrates from day to day. There are still far too many piastres around, and costs keep rising—construction costs are up about two hundred per cent over last year, and some rents have increased fivefold in a matter of weeks—but, money glut or no money glut, the government has been unable to devise a workable taxation scheme, and virtually no income taxes are collected. Bribery and corruption are widespread, among other places on the waterfront, where the Vietcong, taking advantage of a confused labor situation and a transport bottleneck, are siphoning off or surreptitiously purchasing undetermined quantities of incoming goods, including some war matériel. Hoarding and speculation remain rampant, despite government threats to execute any

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